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HISTORY IN RELATION TO THE FORMATION OF CHARACTER¹

PROFESSOR MAX MÜLLER has remarked that the ancient Hindus, while worshipping a multitude of gods, were not in reality polytheistic, since whichever god they happened to be worshipping filled their minds for the time being to the exclusion of all other gods, and was hailed as the sole creator, preserver, and ruler of the universe. For this intense but passing devotion to an endless series of deities he coined the euphonious name Henotheism. Is it a fancy or is it a fact that a visitor attending in turn the various sections of a pedagogical conference and noting the supreme importance successively assigned to every subject in the curriculum, would be tempted to discover a striking similarity to the ancient Hindu religion? Doubtless this tendency in human nature to magnify the object of interest has its uses, since, without it much of the inspiration would be gone from life, and the drudgery of the world would be neglected. Nevertheless, it is a great impediment to clear and sane thinking, and above all, in the matters pertaining to education. For this reason and in the hope of maintaining a truer perspective, it is advisable, before attempting to state the relation of history to character building, to glance briefly at some other factors in the process.

¹ Read before the Northern Illinois Teachers' Association at Dixon.

The character of each individual, as of each nation, is a resultant of many and diverse forces. First of all and underlying all, is the blind brute power of heredity. For good or evil the character of every child is largely formed before it comes into the world. It is still true that the sins of the fathers are visited upon the children unto the third and fourth generations. Every teacher knows children that have come from the cradle with the stamp of vice upon them—children whom the teacher, conscious of his own impotence to save, can only commend to a higher power. But fortunately such cases are the exceptions. The ancestry is seldom consistent either for good or bad, and the ancestral forces that meet in the child and struggle there for mastery are usually in such a condition of equilibrium that a decisive influence may be exercised by the second great factor in the formation of character—environment, including under this name both natural surroundings and human association.

The influence of nature upon character is subtle and intangible but none the less potent. All history demonstrates the reality of its power. The legend of the Great Stone Face contains a profound truth. And the myth of the Giant Antaeus, who gained new strength from each contact with his mother earth, is more than a myth. There is a largeness and serenity in nature which is not in man, and he who would grow to his full stature in brawn and brain must live at least his early life in close contact with nature. Only saplings grow in thickets; great personalities are not developed in a crowd. Man, like the tree, must have room to breathe and grow or he will be stunted in body and mind. For this reason most great men of the modern world have been country bred and passionate lovers of nature. Through its beauty and majesty and serenity, silently working upon the impressionable character, nature arouses feelings and sets in motion forces whose presence and potency no one suspects until the hour of trial tears away the trappings and reveals the man, serene and masterful in the shock of battle, swaying a nation by his eloquence when mighty issues tremble in the balance, or victorious in the conflict of self with self for moral right and civic duty.

Of the various forms of human association the earliest is by far the most important. Where the home life is pure and wholesome, untainted by coarse materialism or refined selfishness, it matters little what other influences are brought to bear. But it is a notorious fact that many children receive from the public school their first and only conception of law as something distinct from their own will. It is this collapse of home discipline, as Professor Rein has pointed out, together with the failure of the church to reach or hold large classes of people that has thrown the task of ethical training upon the public schools. The demand for ethical training is a symptom of its lack, as the "teaching" of patriotism is a symptom of its decay.

In consequence of this need it falls to the school to gather up and hand on to succeeding generations not alone the collected knowledge of the world but also and chiefly its culture, its ethical and social ideals. And this new conception of education as above all an ethical process necessarily leads to greater emphasis upon those studies which contribute most directly to that end. Without denying the value of other subjects, it is evident that this is preëminently the case with literature and history: and these, consequently, have suddenly become the core of the curriculum.

Literature, however, is largely personal and subjective in origin and content. This fact is the source at once of its strength and of its weakness as a factor in ethical training. On this account literature is most effective in bringing the student to a full consciousness of self, and in forming his strictly individual ideals: but the resulting spirit of individualism if carried to excess becomes distinctly anti-social. This spirit which inspired the words of the Greek sophist, "man, the measure of all things," is cosmopolitan rather than national, individual rather than social, negative rather than positive. This result is not reached in every age nor by every author, but the tendency is unmistakable. After Æschylus and Sophocles came Euripides, and finally Lucian; after Shakespeare came Dryden, Pope, and Swift, the English Lucian who drew the logical conclusions of extreme individualism.

In contrast to this subjective and atomistic tendency in literature, history is more objective and universal. To the experience of the individual, history prefixes the experience of the race, freighted with dear-bought wisdom. Ethical precepts have been evolved by the experience of ages; and only by experience, personal or vicarious, can one learn their imperative force. The task of education is largely to substitute for the personal experience of evil, which is too slow and perilous a teacher, the experience of others, as recorded in history. In the lives of men and of nations the sequence of moral cause and effect is clearly revealed. The content of history is thus an ethical content; and, by assimilating this content, each generation may begin its own experience on a higher plane than its predecessor. This is at once the method and the meaning of progress. For this reason history was defined by Dionysius of Halicarnassus as "philosophy teaching by example;" by Diodorus as the "handmaid of Providence, priestess of truth and mother of life;" by Cicero as "the witness of times, light of truth, mistress of life;" by Comenius as the "eye of life;" by Schiller, in the well-known line (*Die Weltgeschichte ist das Weltgericht*) as the "Nemesis of nations, executing righteous judgment;" and by Droysen, in most inspiring and suggestive words, as "the *γνώθι σεαυτόν* of humanity."

History thus furnishes ethical precepts in the most convincing form, viz., examples. It also embodies ideals, not less than literature; not the ideals of individuals, but of classes and of nations; ideals which have had the power to get themselves transmuted into deeds and institutions. And it supplies, furthermore, the inspiration which transforms precepts and ideals into life and character. The function of history as the source of ideals and of inspiration has never been set forth more clearly than in a famous passage of Cicero's *Pro Archia Poeta*.

"If I had not been persuaded," he declares, "from youth up, by the written precepts of many authors, that there is nothing in life greatly to be desired except the renown of integrity, and that in the pursuit of this all sufferings of body and all dangers of death and of exile should be held of little account, I would

never have exposed myself, in behalf of your safety, to so many and so great contests, and to these daily attacks of wicked men. But all the records, all the words of the philosophers, all antiquity are filled with examples. . . . How many character pictures of the most renowned men the Greek and Latin writers have left us, not only for study, but also for imitation! Keeping these in view, in the administration of public affairs, I trained my mind and heart by meditation upon most excellent men."

But important and inspiring as is the personal or biographical side of history, so eloquently described by Cicero, the true theme of history is not the individual, nor any number of individuals, but the race. It is the biography not of men, but of man. It deals primarily with the development of organized society, in all its phases, and is therefore above all a social discipline whose chief purpose and result is to reveal the connection of the individual with a larger social whole. By revealing this connection, history acquires a fivefold value in respect of character formation. In the first place, it constitutes the only solid foundation for rational patriotism and good citizenship. Only as men learn by what slow and painful steps civilization has advanced, and at what fearful cost those blessings have been bought which they now enjoy as freely as light and air, can they appreciate their value, or feel the sacred obligation to preserve them undiminished for posterity. Secondly, it is chiefly through the study of history that those common ethical and social ideals are instilled which unite all classes and many races into one nation, and constitute the animating spirit or soul of the nation. History is the crucible in which all the diverse elements of humanity are fused together by the forces of nationality. Thirdly, history is the only avenue of approach to an understanding of the present organization of society. History is not past politics alone, as some have maintained, but past life; whence it constitutes the common basis of the entire group of social sciences. The study of history is the study of life. It is life in contact with life, mind in contact with mind; the life and mind of the individual with the life and mind of the race. In history each reads the past achievements of the race whose

traditions he is to pass on to the future, sees the stops by which all that is has come to be, and learns to know himself through knowing what has preceded and produced him. Fourthly, the study of history leads not only to a clear understanding of the present, but also to a right outlook on the future. It tends at once to a wise conservatism and an ordered progress. The student of history knows full well that liberty and union—that is, liberty and law—are one and inseparable. He will not encourage revolution, nor pin his faith to social or political panaceas; for he knows that Rome was not built in a day; that the roots of the present lie deep in the past; that no nation has ever prospered which has cast off its traditions and cut loose from its past; and that those who respect not their ancestors will be justly reviled by their descendants. On the other hand, the student of history will never listen to the whisperings of blind reaction or dark pessimism; for he knows that throughout the ages, the old order has been forever changing, yielding place to the new; and he knows also that in spite of all the apparent checks and reactions the course of progress has been in the long run, constantly onward and upward. Finally, it is in history that the unity of the human race, the social bond binding past, present, and future, comes to consciousness. In history, the individual watching the rise and fall of nations, hearing the voices that speak to him from the silent past, and feeling the impress of the living present, comes to realize that he is a part of a larger whole, of a social process that began in ages beyond history, that dominates the present, and will dominate with increasing power the future; a process whose beginning and end no man can conceive, whose purpose is known only to the Great Artificer, but with which every man may coöperate and feel, weak and limited though he be, that he is an instrument of “that power not himself which makes for righteousness.” Like the crusaders of old he may again cry *Deus Volt*.

To summarize; character is the resultant of two forces, heredity, which is beyond our control, and environment, which may be modified by human forethought. In the latter lies the possibility of an ethical education. Environment consists of natural

surroundings and human associations ; both exerting a powerful pressure on character. Of human associations, the family is the most influential ; but its partial decay has thrown the proper function of the family upon the school, hence the demand for an education having primary reference to character. Such education may be obtained, in a measure from all subjects, but most readily and effectively from literature and history. This explains their sudden and unprecedented prominence in the schools and in educational discussions. Literature is the most efficient in developing the consciousness and training the character of the individual as such ; but for this very reason its tendency is subjective and cosmopolitan rather than objective and national. The tendency of history, on the other hand, is in precisely the opposite direction, so that literature and history constitute, in this respect, the educational complements of each other. The content of history, as of literature, is ethical : through it the individual enters into the experience, the ethical heritage, of his race. But unlike literature the ideals embodied are objective and the inspiration is drawn from deeds, not words. History moreover, is distinctively social : its function is the development of character with reference to life in organized society. It is the foundation of patriotism and good citizenship ; it diffuses the ideals which unite the people into one nation ; it leads to an understanding of the present organization of society ; it gives a clear and sane outlook upon the future, combining conservatism and progress ; it causes the individual to feel himself a part of a larger social whole, an instrument of a Higher Power.

Is it asked how much of this may be accomplished in high schools ? I would answer, all of it. History cannot be well taught, as it is in many schools, without accomplishing, in some measure, all of these results, even though not one of them is consciously present to the teacher's mind. It is true in school, as elsewhere, that the things we do best are often those we think least about. The best teaching is done when the teacher is eliminated and the mind of the pupil confronts the facts of the universe and of history, face to face.

EDWARD VAN DYKE ROBINSON

CENTRAL HIGH SCHOOL,
St. Paul, Minn.